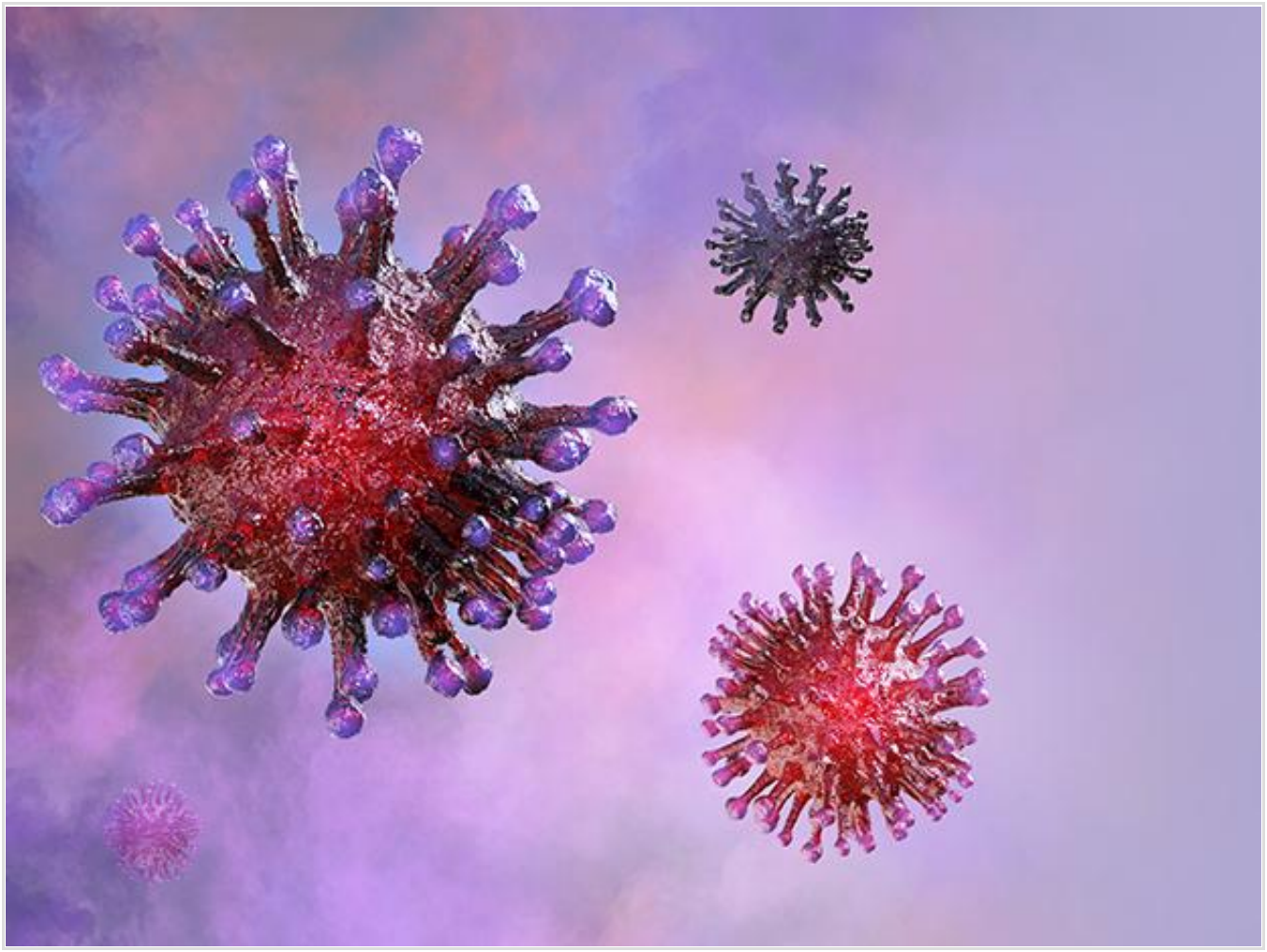
Business Standard

Boyle to Khamenei: The superspreaders behind top Covid conspiracy theories

Mr. Boyle says the coronavirus is a genetically engineered bio-weapon that escaped from a high-level lab in Wuhan, China

AP | New York February 15, 2021 Last Updated at 22:22 IST



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As the coronavirus spread across the globe, so too did speculation about its origins. Perhaps the virus escaped from a lab. Maybe it was engineered as a bioweapon.

Legitimate questions about the virus created perfect conditions for conspiracy theories. In the absence of knowledge, guesswork and propaganda flourished.

College professors with no evidence or training in virology were touted as experts. Anonymous social media users posed as high-level intelligence officials.

And from China to Iran to Russia to the United States, governments amplified claims for their own motives.

The Associated Press collaborated with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab on a nine-month investigation to identify the people and organisations behind some of the most viral misinformation about the origins of the coronavirus.

Their claims were explosive. Their evidence was weak. These are the superspreaders.

FRANCIS BOYLE

WHO HE IS: A Harvard-trained law professor at the University of Illinois, Boyle drafted a 1989 law banning biological weapons and has advised the nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Palestinian Authority.

Boyle has no academic degree in virology or biology but is a longstanding critic of research on pathogens. He has claimed Israeli intelligence was involved in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; that SARS, the swine flu and Ebola have been genetically modified; and that West Nile virus and Lyme disease escaped from a U.S. biowarfare lab. He has also claimed that Microsoft founder Bill Gates was involved in the spread of Zika.

COVID CLAIM: Boyle says the coronavirus is a genetically engineered bioweapon that escaped from a high-level lab in Wuhan, China. He maintains it shows signs of nanotechnological tinkering and the insertion of proteins from HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus. He alleges that U.S. researchers helped create it, and that thousands of doctors, scientists, and elected leaders are conspiring to hide the truth.

Boyle promoted his claim in an email to a list of news organisations and personal contacts on January 24, 2020.

EVIDENCE? Boyle bases his argument on circumstantial evidence: the presence of a Biosafety Level 4 lab in Wuhan, the fact that other viruses have escaped from other labs in the past, and his belief that governments around the world are engaged in a secret arms race over biological weapons.

Biosafety Level 4 labs - or BSL4 labs - have the highest level of biosafety precautions.

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GREATGAMEINDIA

WHAT IT IS: A website that was an early promoter of the theory that the coronavirus was engineered.

Its January 26, 2020, story on Coronavirus bioweapon-How China Stole the Coronavirus From Canada and Weaponized It was picked up by far-right financial blog Zero Hedge and shared to thousands of social media users before it was promoted by conservative website RedStateWatcher and received more than 6 million engagements.

COVID CLAIM: GreatGameIndia claims that the virus, which has now killed more than 2 million people worldwide, was first found in the lungs of a Saudi man and then sent to labs in the Netherlands and then Canada, where it was stolen by Chinese scientists. The article relies in part on speculation from Dany Shoham, a virologist and former lieutenant colonel in Israeli military intelligence.

Shoham was quoted discussing the possibility that COVID is linked to bioweapon research in a Jan. 26, 2020, article in the conservative U.S. newspaper The Washington Times. In that article, Shoham was quoted saying there was no evidence to support the idea that the virus has escaped from a lab, but GreatGameIndia did not include that context in its piece.

EVIDENCE? The coronavirus most likely first appeared in humans after jumping from an animal, a World Health Organization panel announced this month, saying an alternate theory that the virus leaked from a Chinese lab was unlikely.

THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON GLOBALIZATION

WHAT IT IS: The Montreal-based center publishes articles on global politics and policy, including a healthy dose of conspiracy theories on vaccines and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It's led by Michel Chossudovsky, a professor emeritus of economics at the University of Ottawa and a conspiracy theorist who has argued the U.S. military can control the weather.

The center publishes authors from around the world many of whom have advanced baseless claims about the origins of the outbreak.

In February, for instance, the center published an interview with Igor Nikulin suggesting the coronavirus was a U.S. bioweapon created to target Chinese people.

COVID CLAIM: While the center has published several articles about the virus, one suggesting it originated in the U.S. caught the attention of top Chinese officials.

On March 12, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian retweeted an article published by the center titled: "China's Coronavirus: A Shocking Update. Did The Virus Originate in the US?

This article is very much important to each and every one of us, he posted in English on Twitter. Please read and retweet it. COVID-19: Further Evidence that the Virus Originated in the US.

He also tweeted: It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation.

EVIDENCE? The World Health Organization has concluded that the coronavirus emerged in China, where the first cases and deaths were reported. No evidence has surfaced to suggest the virus was imported into China by the U.S.